



U.S. SENATE REPUBLICAN POLICY COMMITTEE

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Cautious Optimism Seems to Be in Order

**Withdrawal from Iraq: Current Gains
and Momentum Allow for It, but Risks Remain**

Executive Summary

- In a speech on February 27, 2009, President Obama announced his plan to withdraw a substantial number of U.S. troops from Iraq according to a set timeline. This plan would leave up to 50,000 U.S. troops in Iraq after August 2010.
- Although claiming that the U.S. combat mission will be over by August 2010, these troops will assuredly be in combat in Iraq after that date, as the president's plan by its terms calls for remaining troops to conduct targeted counter-terrorism missions.
- Moreover, with up to 50,000 U.S. troops in place in Iraq, the adversary will also have a say whether U.S. troops are in combat after August 2010.
- This presence in Iraq is not to be lamented, however, as it is necessary, and hopefully sufficient, to help provide both internal stability and a deterrent to external interference.
- The positive momentum currently in Iraq is not irreversible, and the gains achieved thus far are fragile. Upon the drawdown of U.S. troops, these successes may be tested along several potentially violent flashpoints:
 - a reconstituted al Qaeda in Iraq,
 - Kurd-Arab tensions,
 - a return to violence of Moqtada al Sadr's faction,
 - Sunni-Shia violence, or
 - Shia-on-Shia violence in southern Iraq (Basra).
- In the end, there is reason for cautious optimism if President Obama remains committed to withdrawing U.S. troops in accordance with meeting the goal of success, rather than along some timeline emanating from a campaign promise.

Introduction

In a speech on February 27, 2009, President Obama announced his plan to withdraw a substantial number of U.S. troops from Iraq according to a set timeline. His withdrawal would leave up to 50,000 U.S. troops in Iraq after August 2010 with a re-defined mission, which will include combat despite all assertions to the contrary. Given the success of the surge, this withdrawal plan looks more like a drawdown under favorable conditions rather than like a departure in ignominious defeat. Although not calling it victory, President Obama defined the goal for Iraq as an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant. In the end, there is reason for cautious optimism if President Obama remains committed to withdrawing U.S. troops in accordance with meeting this end-state goal, rather than along some timeline emanating from a campaign promise.

The Goal in Iraq: Sovereign, Stable, and Self-Reliant

In his speech, President Obama defined the desired outcome for Iraq as an Iraq that “is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant.” This was once called “victory,” leaving in place in Iraq a government that could “govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself,” a goal with which the Iraq Study Group concurred.¹ President Obama proclaimed that the first part of the effort to reach that goal required removing U.S. combat troops from Iraq according to some fixed timetable, concluding that the U.S. combat mission in Iraq will end by August 31, 2010. Although the date certain for withdrawal does present cause for concern, as even the Iraq Study Group opposed “set[ting] timetables or deadlines for withdrawal,”² it is not inconsistent with the requirement of the Iraq-United States Status of Forces Agreement that all U.S. forces be withdrawn from Iraq by December 31, 2011.³

Up to 50,000 U.S. troops will remain in Iraq directed towards this goal.

President Obama then stated that after this drawdown there would remain up to 50,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, who would have the mission of: 1) training, equipping, and advising Iraqi Security Forces; 2) conducting targeted counter-terrorism missions; and 3) protecting ongoing U.S. civilian and military efforts within Iraq. This sizable residual force is praiseworthy, rather than to be lamented. First, the requirement of such a force should hardly be surprising to Democrats, as after all, it has long been their policy to require a precipitous withdrawal from Iraq, while leaving in Iraq some U.S. forces for these missions.⁴ In this speech, the current Commander-in-Chief determined, as he should, that it would require up to 50,000 U.S. troops to

¹ George W. Bush, Remarks of the president in Nashville, TN, Feb. 1, 2006, 42 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 152; Iraq Study Group, Final Report, p. 31 (“We agree with the goal of U.S. policy in Iraq, as stated by the President: an Iraq that can ‘govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself.’”).

² Iraq Study Group, Final Report p. 67.

³ Iraq-United States Status of Forces Agreement art. 24(1) (“All the United States Forces shall withdraw from all Iraqi territory no later than December 31, 2011.”).

⁴ For example, the Senate Democratic policy in 2007 was to require the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq to begin within 120 days, while leaving behind a limited presence for the following missions: 1) training, equipping, and providing logistical support to the Iraqi Security Forces; 2) engaging in targeted counter-terrorism operations; and 3) protecting U.S. and coalition personnel and infrastructure. S. Amdt. 2087 to H.R. 1585, FY08 Defense Authorization bill, Record Vote No. 252, July 18, 2007.

fulfill this mission. Second, this type of presence signals a commitment to an internally stable Iraq, as well as to signal a tripwire deterrent to neighbors who may seek to interfere in Iraq's affairs.

Meeting this goal will require U.S. troops to be in combat in Iraq after August 31, 2010.

Just as President Obama wished to assert “as plainly” as he could that the U.S. combat mission would end by the date certain of August 31, 2010, it should rather be said quite plainly that a substantial number of U.S. troops will remain in combat in Iraq on September 1, 2010. First and foremost, there should be no mistake that the U.S. troops remaining in Iraq at that time will be engaging in combat under the very terms of their mission statement. Can “conducting targeted counter-terrorism missions” be construed any other way? In fact, Secretary Gates pointed out that the “remaining force will engage in counter-terrorism operations,” and when asked if this meant “combat,” he replied, “yes.”⁵

Second, as a matter of practice, U.S. troops left behind in Iraq to conduct targeted counter-terrorism missions and protect ongoing civilian and military efforts within Iraq can easily be required to conduct missions that more closely resemble general infantry operations. As the military has learned over the past few years in Iraq, a continuous on-the-ground presence is essential to the success of counter-insurgency operations, and the general tasks of combat and reconnaissance patrolling are likely to be required in support of counter-terrorism operations. Moreover, to execute a targeted counter-terrorism operation properly, special operations forces sometimes require the support of larger covering forces to provide security. This combination of forces executing such operations can quickly become a standing combat presence in Iraq.

Finally, although President Obama may have in mind a date by which he would like the U.S. combat mission in Iraq to end, if he is truly committed to a goal of an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant, an oft-repeated aphorism counsels that the enemy “will have a vote” on whether U.S. combat will be completed by that date consistent with the goal to be achieved. In this respect, there is reason to be cautiously optimistic about President Obama's announcement, as Senator McCain believes President Obama “reserve[d] the right to revisit the timeline currently envisioned based on conditions on the ground.”⁶ To this end, it remains to be seen if the Commander-in-Chief will be able to revisit a commitment to a campaign promise to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq by a date certain if it comes to pass that conditions on the ground do not permit withdrawal by that date certain.⁷

⁵ <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0902/27/acd.02.html>

⁶ 155 Cong. Rec. S2578 (daily ed. Feb. 27, 2009) (statement of Sen. McCain).

⁷ Meghan O'Sullivan, Topic A – Obama's Plan for Iraq, Wash Post A15, March 1, 2009 (“What should be done if the security situation deteriorates in 2009 or 2010? What is more important—adherence to the 18-month timetable or safeguarding Iraqi and regional stability?”).

The United States Is at a Tipping Point in Terms of Reaching Its Goals in Iraq

There currently seems to be momentum towards reaching the overall goal of success in Iraq, which is a government that is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant. The gains achieved thus far to that end are fragile, and the momentum is not irreversible.⁸ It seems that the assessment of Ryan Crocker, then-U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, to then-Senator Obama at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Iraq in April 2008, remains applicable today. At that hearing, Ambassador Crocker assessed that “when Iraq gets to the point that it can carry forward its further development without a major commitment of U.S. forces, with still a lot of problems out there but where they and we would have a fair certitude that, again, they can drive it forward themselves without significant danger of having the whole thing slip away from them again, then, clearly, our profile, our presence diminishes markedly.”⁹ Hopefully the drawdown from Iraq will take place pursuant to an assessment of the commanders on the ground that this state of being has been reached in Iraq, rather than some adherence to a temporal place on a calendar.

Positive momentum in Iraq may be tested along several potential flashpoints.

Various issues remain unresolved and unsettled in Iraq, and there is a risk that the drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq may expose fissure points that the presence of U.S. troops may otherwise prevent from exploding. Some of these circumstances have the potential to become violent. For example, they may take their most violent form if al Qaeda is able to reconstitute itself in Iraq due to a depleted U.S. troop presence. As President Obama has acknowledged, “al Qaeda in Iraq has been dealt a serious blow,” and the contribution of U.S. troops to achieving that end was substantial. Although the Iraqi Security Forces continue to increasingly take the lead for Iraq’s security responsibility, they still rely on various Coalition enablers, such as close air support, when conducting operations.¹⁰ To this end, it is an open question whether the Iraqi Security Forces would be able to resist an effort by al Qaeda to reconstitute itself in Iraq once there is a significant drawdown of U.S. troops from there.

Another potentially violent flashpoint involves Arab-Kurd¹¹ tensions, which manifest themselves in various forms, such as general tension between the Kurdish region and the central government, or specifically over the issue of Kirkuk and other disputed internal boundaries in the north. Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution was meant to address these tensions, requiring a referendum on whether the Kirkuk province is to affiliate formally with the three provinces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (“KRG”). This process now also includes the question of whether to integrate into the KRG some Kurdish-inhabited cities in the surrounding provinces of Diyala and Ninevah. This general territorial dispute between the Kurds and the central government, and the fact that the process meant to resolve it has languished, is only exacerbated by complaints from the central government that the KRG is moving forward on oil and gas development prior to the completion of a national hydrocarbon (oil) law.¹²

⁸ Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, p. 28 (Dec. 2008) (“Security in Iraq continues on a positive trend, . . . [but] the situation is still fragile.”).

⁹ Ryan Crocker, Statement of Then-U.S. Ambassador to Iraq at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Iraq, Apr. 8, 2008.

¹⁰ Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, p. 32.

¹¹ The Kurdish people are mostly Sunni Muslim, but are not Arabs.

¹² *Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security*, p. 16, CRS Rpt. RL31339.

The presence of U.S. troops provides some insurance against these somewhat dormant flashpoints of tension potentially turning violent. They are just two examples, in addition to the potential return to violence of Moqtada al Sadr's faction, Sunni-Shia violence, or even Shia-on-Shia violence in southern Iraq, most notably Basra. Any drawdown of U.S. troops must be done in such a way so as not to exacerbate these tensions upon departure.

Conclusion

President Obama has defined his goal for Iraq as an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant, and he has calibrated a troop withdrawal to meet that end to a fixed timetable. The president has asserted that the U.S. combat mission will be over in Iraq in August 2010, and that the up-to-50,000 U.S. troops remaining in Iraq on that date will have a more circumspect mission. The American people, however, should be under no illusions that U.S. troops will remain in harm's way after that date, as they will be "conducting targeted counter-terrorism missions" that are otherwise known as combat. This presence is necessary, however, and hopefully sufficient to help provide both internal stability and a deterrent to external interference. There is reason to be cautiously supportive of the president's announcement, if he remains committed to withdrawing U.S. troops in accordance with meeting the goals he has laid out for Iraq rather than along some timeline emanating from a campaign promise.